

Rest as Forfeited and Promised

Rest is, in its essence, a divine phenomenon, and yet it utterly depends on *man* for its operation in the world. The reason is that rest signifies God's sovereign administration of His lordship over His creation, and He determined to carry out this administration through His human creature – the creature He formed in His own image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-28). God's "rest" involves His presence and interaction with His creation, and man, the divine image and likeness, provides this interface. *The creation supplies God with His "resting place" (His sanctuary), but man is the created being through whom God carries out His regal rest.* For this reason, rest (shabbat) is forfeited whenever the divine-human relationship is compromised. And because this relationship is the very heart of peace (the harmonious relationship between God and His creation, and then within the creation itself), the absence (or loss) of rest points to the absence (or loss) of peace. The one cannot exist without the other.

This is the framework for interpreting the *fall* and its consequences. Failure to apply it (or applying a different framework) has led many to conclude that the issue in the fall was simply man's disobedience to an explicit commandment from God. From this vantage point, *what* God commanded is irrelevant; the only thing that mattered was that God issued a directive and man disobeyed it. But to take this approach is to completely miss the point of the narrative, and so miss the true nature, significance and outcome of man's fall. And this misunderstanding is catastrophic, for it results in misunderstanding the remedy. *If one misjudges the calamity in Eden, he will misjudge God's resolution of it.* Hence those who view the fall in terms of disobedience to commandment tend to view God's restorative work in terms of man becoming truly compliant: Through Christ, man the law-breaker becomes man the law-keeper.

But the truth is that God's directive wasn't at all arbitrary; the issue isn't *that* God commanded, but *what* He commanded, and especially the way the obligation is described and situated. This is evident first in the fact that the Genesis narrative takes great pains with it and the episode surrounding it. But it's even more clear from the imagery used in the account and its continuing importance in the scriptural narrative as it progresses toward the messianic work and its outcome. In particular is the imagery of the *tree of life*, which the Genesis account juxtaposes with the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil*, the latter being the specific point of man's testing and failure. Interpreting the fall, then, involves several crucial considerations:

- 1) First, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, as the focus of God's commandment, must be interpreted in terms of the tree of life and its scriptural significance.
- 2) These two trees, depicted as standing in the center of God's garden sanctuary, pertain to man in terms of his created nature and function as *image-son*: man as dwelling with God and administering His loving lordship over His creation (Genesis 1:26-31, 2:7-17).
- 3) The two trees represent antithetical principles; each precludes the other. Man's open and enduring access to life, then, depends on refusing the knowledge of good and evil (as the text understands it). The latter constitutes man's disobedience, which severs him from life. Hence the remedy brings the recovery and perfection of life – life as it inheres in God and is communicated by Him to His human creature (cf. Genesis 2:7, 17, 3:13-24).

- 4) Finally, the fall and subsequent promise of remedy must be interpreted within the reality of *rest* (shabbat) that God inaugurated at the completion of His work of creation. The implication, then, is that human failure destroyed the rest that marked the relationship between God and His beloved creation. In the language of Genesis, the creation – with man at its center – was brought under the curse of death and perpetual unrest (toil). And man, now cut off from God’s life, was expelled from His presence, and so from the realities of rest and peace (ref. 3:22-4:24).

Thus the fall of man did infinitely more than incur guilt for disobedience. It effectively collapsed the created order, plunging it under the curse of desolation, disintegration and ultimate destruction. God’s “very good” creation was only a memory, and shalom and shabbat were supplanted by alienation, enmity and strife at every level and in every respect (Genesis 3:17-19). Any promise of remedy, then, would hold out the recovery of peace and rest.

Rest as the Marrow of Promise

1. The fall introduced death – not physical mortality as such, but separation from God’s life. And because God’s seventh-day rest signified His creational rule to be carried out through man, the image-son, the death of man brought an end to God’s rest and the peace that enabled it. The whole created order now existed in a cursed state of unrest and hostility driving all things toward disintegration culminating in dissolution. It was in the midst of that unimaginable circumstance that the Creator pledged to bring life out of death, implying that peace and rest would once again mark His creation.
2. The calamity that man had brought on the created order followed him in his expulsion from God’s garden-sanctuary, and soon the inhabited earth was filled with the unrest of pride, hatred and violence. God’s assessment of His image-bearer was that “every intent of the thoughts of his heart is only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5), and He determined to purge the world of its pollution and corruption and usher in a renewed creation. This meant raising up a new Adam – a new progenitor of a new human race, and the man God chose for this was *Noah*. Notably, his name means *rest*, which pointed to his role as the one who would give rest to men in view of their toilsome existence under the curse (Genesis 5:28-29). The text wants the reader to view the flood episode as addressing the creational curse with a new creation presided over by a new Adam (cf. 1:27-28, 9:1-2), but this means that it had to address the issue of *rest*.
3. Noah was the prototypical new man appointed by God to bring rest from the travail of the curse. But, being a prototype, he only pointed ahead toward another who would actually accomplish what he prefigured. Though washed by the purging flood, the world continued to languish under the curse, because Noah, the new Adam, was a son of Adam. The flood hadn’t rectified the human condition, and thus the promise of rest which Noah embodied had to await one of Noah’s offspring. The post-flood blessing spotlighted Shem (Genesis 9:26-27), and in due time a chosen seed emerged from Shem’s line, namely the man *Abram*. By covenant decree, the future restoration pledged to Eve was bound over to Abram; in him, the Creator’s blessing would flow out to all the earth.

The Genesis account doesn't directly associate the theme of rest with Abram, but it certainly does so indirectly. First of all, the text connects Abram with Noah (Genesis 11:10-26), and therefore through Noah back to the seed promised to Eve. Genesis draws a direct line from Seth (the replacement "seed" for Abel – Genesis 4:25) to Abram, but so as to lay a new foundation in him. God's covenant with Abram stood upon His promise to Eve, but in view of a "seed" to come through Abram. He was to be the father of a *regal* and *priestly* people – a family of covenant sons who exercise God's wise and loving rule from His dwelling place. Abram enjoyed some aspects of this destiny, but it largely awaited a future time (cf. Genesis 12:1-3, 15:1-21, 17:1-8, 15-16; Hebrews 11:8-10).

Most importantly, these outcomes and blessings had the Creator-God at their heart. Yes, Abram was to become *Abraham* – the father of a multitude of nations and regal offspring (Genesis 17:15-16), but these would derive their nobility and power from their status as God's chosen people: people among whom He would make His dwelling place and take up His rest as enthroned Lord (Genesis 17:1-8); people who would participate in His rest as image-children. And so, while the idea of rest wasn't explicit in God's covenant with Abraham, it was everywhere implied by its concerns and promises.

4. Covenant status and blessing passed from Abraham to Isaac, and then to Jacob, whom God renamed *Israel* (Genesis 32). God then enlarged the *man* Israel in his twelve sons to become the *nation* of Israel – the covenant house among whom He would establish His dwelling place and find His rest (25:1-8). God's intent was to dwell in the midst of His people, but such that they communed with Him in the place of His sanctuary, the place of His rest. Canaan was that dwelling place, and thus God directed the children of Israel toward that land after liberating them from their bondage in Egypt (Exodus 15:17; cf. Deuteronomy 12:1-12, 25:19; Joshua 1:13-15, 21:43-44). Israel's covenant life in Canaan was to be that of a devoted son dwelling with a Father in blessed union and communion; in this way, it represented the reversal of the alienation and banishment that occurred in Eden. Crossing the Jordan into Canaan ended Israel's Egyptian exile, but it more importantly underscored God's commitment to one day end the creation's exile by redeeming and reconciling all things to Himself. Entrance into God's sanctuary-land signified a kind of return to Eden, and thus life in Canaan was to be, in every respect, a *sabbath* existence – life lived out within God's rest (ref. again Psalm 95:6-11).

So it was that the Sinai covenant that defined and prescribed Israel's life with God had the concept of sabbath at its very heart; indeed God established sabbatical observance as a *sign* of that covenant (Exodus 31:12-17; Ezekiel 20:10-20; cf. also Leviticus 24:7-8; Deuteronomy 5:12-15). Many associate this with the weekly sabbath, especially since this prescription was part of the "Ten Words" (Exodus 20:8-11). But, in fact, the seventh-day sabbath was only one aspect of Israel's sabbath obligation; the covenant made it clear that, in every respect, God's children were to be a sabbath people.

- a. First, sabbath observances punctuated Israel's festal celebrations that marked out the nation's annual calendar, informed its self-understanding, and ordered its worship. These included *Yom Kippur* (Leviticus 16), the *Feast of Trumpets* (Leviticus 23:24-25), and the *Feast of Booths* (Leviticus 23:33-39).

- b. The association of the sabbath principle with the number *seven* reinforced for Israel that shabbat (rest) has to do with completion, fullness and perfection; again, *shabbat* is inseparable from *shalom*. This connection is most obvious in the instance of the seventh-day sabbath, but it existed in other, equally important sabbatical observances. In addition to the weekly sabbath, Israel was to observe a seventh-year sabbath. And then, the seventh-year sabbath was to have its own sabbatical fullness in every seventh iteration. This “seventh seven” inaugurated Israel’s *Jubilee*, the nation’s pinnacle sabbath observance that released and restored every person and every dimension of Israel’s covenant existence (Leviticus 25:1-17). That climactic event in Israel’s calendar anticipated its own climax in the messianic “year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:16-21).

Israel, the covenant son, was to be a sabbath nation – a people who enjoyed God’s rest as He administered His kingdom rule through them from His sanctuary in their midst. But what the covenant held out and prescribed it could not achieve; for all the Father’s faithfulness, patience and pleas, the son remained estranged. Israel was abiding in God’s sanctuary land, but had failed to enter His rest, a fact which every Sabbath reminded them of with the reading of Psalm 95. What the people knew in their hearts soon became openly manifest, when the day of Yahweh’s patience ended and He departed His temple, leaving what remained of His covenant household to await to coming day of destruction and exile. If Israel had any notions whatsoever of sharing in God’s rest, exile, captivity and desolation caused them to evaporate (cf. Jeremiah 6-8; Ezekiel 8-11, 24:1-27; etc.).

5. But this wasn’t to be the last word; God’s intent that His creation should share in His rest hadn’t changed. So His sanctuary land, long deprived of its sabbaths by His unfaithful sons, received them in full (cf. Leviticus 25:1-5, 26:13-35; 2 Chronicles 36). Afterward, little by little, the children returned to that land and rebuilt the temple and city, but only to find that their covenant Lord and Father remained in exile from His dwelling place. Though again living in the place Yahweh consecrated for His own rest, the children would find no rest until He returned to His sanctuary to again take up His rest.

The prophets insisted that that day was coming, and it would come when Yahweh arose again in a mighty act of redemption, deliverance, renewal and ingathering as He had done centuries before in Egypt. Another “exodus” was appointed for Abraham’s covenant household, this time in connection with the messianic figure Moses and the prophets spoke of (Isaiah 51-55). This One would bring the rest God intended for His creation and promised from the time of the fall (ref. Isaiah 35, 59-62, 66; Jeremiah 23:1-8; Ezekiel 34, 37; cf. also Micah 4:1-4; Zechariah 2-3; 9:9-10; Malachi 3:1-12; etc.).

Rest Realized in Jesus

God’s promise of liberation, ingathering and renewal had *rest* (shabbat) at its heart, and thus the theme of rest (and peace) was woven into Jesus’ self-disclosure, both in His sabbath deeds and words and His witness to the in-breaking kingdom – which testimony His disciples continued after His ascension (cf. Matthew 10:1-15, 11:28-30 with 12:1-12; Luke 1:67-79, 4:14-40, 13:10-14:5, 19:28-42; John 5:1-17, 14:27, 16:33; Acts 10:34-37; Romans 14:1-17; Ephesians 2:1-22).